

CURRENT HISTORY

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Is There a Third World?

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A third world, it would seem, has always been with us. But it has taken on distinct identities—meaning different things to different people—just as it has shifted about the map from place to place. Today the label, ubiquitous though it may be, is more uncertain than ever. Such basic questions as "What is the third world?" "Where is the third world?" and "Who lives in the third world?" have no simple answers. Only by carefully examining both its intellectual history and its current usage can we begin to make sense of this much-abused yet still seemingly indispensable term.

A PREJUDICIAL CONCEPT?

Ten years ago, in my second year of university teaching, I was harshly criticized by a student on the first day of class for using a term that he deemed to be politically incorrect. Public denunciations of this sort are not an unknown occurrence in academia, although in the late 1980s they were relatively rare. What was striking about this experience was less the attack itself than the term that had provoked it: "third world." "To place the poor countries of the globe into a 'third world' is utterly demeaning," the student lectured me and the rest of the class, "and implies that they have a kind of third-rate status. Only a noninsulting term, like 'developing nations,'" he went on, "could possibly be considered appropriate for classroom use."

I was momentarily dumbfounded. Here was a young man who had all the instincts and demeanor

of a campus radical, yet was apparently totally innocent of the vocabulary and conceptual framework of leftist social thought. "Actually," I eventually stammered, "'third world' has traditionally been the favored term of those on the left who champion the poor countries and exploited peoples of the world. The label 'developing countries' has been criticized for implying a modernization paradigm that most leftists find objectionable." Now it was his turn to be dumbfounded.

The longer I reflect on this exchange, the more I am convinced that the student raised a crucially important point. The term "third world" can easily be construed as insulting, not to mention confusing and contradictory. Why on earth would we want to relegate this, or any other part of the world, to a third position? "The global zone of poverty," as a colleague of mine recently pointed out, "is not a third world at all, but is rather at least two-thirds of the entire world." After wrestling at length with these and other conceptual challenges, I have tried to drop the word from my geographical lexicon altogether. But this is no easy task. The three-worlds notion is deeply embedded in professional as well as popular geography, and most alternatives, including the even simpler "North-South" formula, entail headaches of their own.

CIVILIZATION AND THE "PRIMITIVE"

To understand the problems inherent in a term like "third world," it is essential to recall the dramatic shifts in global geopolitics that have driven our conceptual frameworks for dividing the world. In the first half of the twentieth century, a very different tripartite scheme of division, based on putative trajectories of historical development,

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prevailed in the United States and Europe. At the time, two major “civilizations”—an advanced and enlightened West, and a stagnant and despotic Orient—were seen as sharing the globe with a third realm of “primitive societies,” found in such isolated areas as Central Africa and New Guinea. The division of labor in the American academy reflected this worldview, effectively allocating different pieces of the earth’s terrain to different scholarly fields. Social scientists, most historians, and those in the mainstream humanities generally concentrated on the West; Orientalists, trained in the arts and literatures of civilized Asia, took on the East; and anthropologists held a near monopoly over the “people without history,” denizens of the so-called primitive world.

This simplistic framework was, of course, far from problem-free. Russia and much of Latin America, in particular, fit poorly into this system; postrevolutionary Russia, for example, represented the core of a geopolitical East while still being part of an industrialized, historically Christian West. Yet determined scholars like the German historian Karl Wittfogel labored to smooth out the discrepancies, effectively globalizing concepts such as Oriental despotism and Western enlightenment by linking each to environmental conditions that could be found beyond their original Eurasian hearth.

By midcentury this increasingly anachronistic system of division was of little use to policymakers. Faced with the upheavals of world war and its aftermath, the United States government in the mid-1940s commissioned an interdisciplinary group of American scholars to effectively remap the planet. The result was a new cartography based on world regions, the geographical building blocks of the postwar area studies complex. The old triumvirate of West, East, and Primitive was dismantled into a handful of constituent areas, defined primarily on the basis of supposed cultural similarities, with each region being at least formally equivalent to every other. Thus Western Europe came to be contrasted not with a singular Orient and a plethora of Primitives, but rather with such distinctive regional formations as East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. Likewise, Latin America was granted recognition as a world region in its own right. This leveling of the conceptual playing field represented a major breakthrough, and one with significant progressive potential. In practice, however, a new threefold division quickly emerged to replace the old one, justified by the geopolitical and economic criteria that drove the cold war.

CREATING THE THREE WORLDS

The new scheme was, of course, that of the “three worlds.” Its first world was in essence a glorified West, now enlarged to encompass all countries with advanced industrial economies and democratic governments (including those that lay far outside the bounds of traditional Christendom). The second world, by contrast, was defined as the zone of industrial Communism, with its geopolitical center of gravity in the Soviet Union. The contest between these two primary worlds, most now assumed, formed the central dynamic of postwar global history. The remainder of the world, and its largest part, fell into a residual category: that of the third world. Here one could encounter all manner of political-economic forms, from market-oriented democracies to capitalist dictatorships, and from socially oriented democracies to totalitarian Marxist states. What purportedly united these diverse regimes were their predominantly rural economies and their widespread poverty.

Although this three-worlds schema haphazardly mixed geopolitical and socioeconomic criteria—particularly in defining the third world as a fundamentally more eclectic category than either the first or the second world—it proved attractive to scholars of highly divergent political persuasions. The third world became the arena of uncertainty and contestation, and in the process came to mean very different things to different parties. For leftist scholars, this was the victimized periphery of the colonial and neocolonial powers, but also the vanguard where genuine socialism might yet be created. For liberals and conservatives, these countries were backward but developing, the belated modernizers who would follow and confirm the path of the first world (although few held such hopes for countries, such as China, that had clearly joined the Marxist camp).

The inevitable effort to align the new three-worlds scheme with the earlier tripartite model resulted in some serious conceptual slippage, leaving a few countries in anomalous situations. One salient example was Japan. Although an obvious member of the former Orient, Japan by the 1960s was also an industrial democracy (not to mention a stalwart ally of the United States in the cold war), and could only be defined as a first world country. And so it generally was. But whenever the third world was conceived not in opposition to the contemporary first world but rather to its intellectual antecedent, “the West” (as was commonplace in discussions of “third world history,” for instance),

a paradox was generated. In this particular semantic field, Japan was either a non-Western member of the West, or a non-poor member of the third world.

Despite such quirks and logical inconsistencies, the three-worlds model proved generally serviceable through the 1970s. By the 1990s, its premises had been badly shaken. This was especially apparent in the differential economic growth that had blurred its boundaries. While in general the rich countries had remained rich and the poor countries poor, this was not the case everywhere. Most maps of the third world still include South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Yet South Korea and Taiwan ought now to be reclassified as advanced industrial democracies, and Singapore, although hardly a democratic model, is more prosperous than Britain by many measures. Likewise, the three-worlds framework has had trouble categorizing wealthy oil-exporting countries, such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

A more serious challenge to the model stems from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the end of the cold war, the second world, as it was originally defined, no longer exists. The question then arises: can we still have a “third world” if we no longer have a second?

WHICH WAY IS NORTH?

One way to sidestep this dilemma is to collapse the older tripartite global division into a simpler binary, contrasting the wealthy core countries with their poor counterparts in the once colonized and later neocolonized periphery. In this increasingly common formulation, the third world becomes the post-colonial South and is juxtaposed with an industrialized North comprising all the former imperial powers. Such a view, which effectively combines the former first and second worlds into a single category, originated at a time (the 1970s) when environmentalists, among others, began to argue that the highly militarized and industrialized economies of the former Soviet bloc were on a trajectory that was fundamentally similar to that of their wealthy counterparts in the first world. The similarities of industrial societies across the cold-war divide suggested the image of a single militarily and economically dominant Northern tier, stretching from the United States and Canada through Europe and across the Soviet sphere to Japan, which was juxtaposed to a less-developed South that remained mired in poverty and dependence.

If the political unraveling of the Soviet system undercut the logic of the three-worlds model, the

subsequent economic collapse of the former second world has made a shambles of the North–South model as well. Despite Russia’s residual military strength, it is hard to imagine including Russia, the Ukraine, and Bulgaria—let alone Albania and Tajikistan—as members of a wealthy and powerful North at century’s end. The global zone of destitution, in other words, now appears to have a very large Northern component—and one whose existence cannot entirely be explained as a legacy of colonialism. Considering the recent economic gains of such “Southern” regimes as Singapore and Chile—as well as the continuing prosperity of Australia and New Zealand—the idea of a global North–South divide appears elusive indeed.

The most stubborn problem of all is the sheer lumpiness of the category. Even if we disregarded the typological issues arising from the demise of the second world, as well as the gross geographical inaccuracies of the terms North and South, the concept of a global third world or South would still prove incapable of carrying the burden assigned to it. It simply aggregates countries and regions of vastly different social, cultural, and economic circumstances under a single rubric. Argentina, routinely assigned to the third world, arguably has far more in common with the poorer parts of the first world (southern Italy, say, or northwestern Spain) than it does with the “typical” member of the third world. This is true whether a standard measurements of economic development (such as per capita GNP) or indices of social development, such as average longevity or literacy rates, is used. According to the 1998 World Bank atlas, Argentina’s per capita GNP is more than \$8,000, a figure much more comparable to New Zealand’s \$15,700 or Portugal’s \$10,160 than to Kenya’s \$320, much less Mozambique’s \$80. Argentines can expect to live 73 years, only 4 years less than Americans, but 15 longer than Kenyans—and 29 longer than citizens of Guinea-Bissau.

Even third world countries with similar levels of per capita GNP often have such divergent social policies and patterns of wealth distribution that basic comparability cannot be assumed. Contrast, for example, the relatively healthy, well-educated, and demographically stable population of Sri Lanka with that of Bolivia. Bolivia’s per capita GNP figure of \$830 exceeds that of Sri Lanka by \$90, yet Sri Lankans outlive Bolivians on average by 12 years. More strikingly, Bolivia’s infant mortality rate is 6.7 percent, whereas Sri Lanka’s is only 1.5 percent—not much higher than the 0.7 percent rate of the United States.

The concept of a monolithic third world not only conceals differences in basic economic and social development, but also hides the transformation experienced by different poor countries over the past several decades. It also fails to show the profound variations in different states' connections with and participation in the global economy. How much is to be gained, for example, by placing Thailand and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) in the same global category? Both are assuredly poor by American standards, but in the former case one finds the dynamism—and the extreme vulnerability—of an economy that is thoroughly enmeshed in the webs of global capitalism, whereas in the latter one finds a “de-developing” state, lacking a real central government, increasingly isolated from the global system. Thailand and Congo are, in most respects, worlds apart.

Finally, a category like the third world is challenged by our insistence on categorizing each country under one metageographic term. While every country as a whole is classified as belonging to the first world or the third world, regional economic differences within states are often much greater than the differences between states. Northeast Brazil belongs to the third world by any definition of the term, but the same cannot be said for the country's far south. And Brazil's Sao Paulo state, while the site of appalling poverty, is nothing if not industrialized. Most of China—still a dismally poor country—would have to be placed in the third world, but what of booming Shanghai or Hong Kong? The latter, a once-again Chinese city, is wealthier, more wired, and more “central” to the global economy than are most urban areas of Europe or North America (Hong Kong's per capita “GNP” exceeds that of the United Kingdom). Likewise, within the United States are pockets of poverty, such as Pine

Ridge, South Dakota, that could fit easily into the third world category.

FOR RICHER OR POORER

While it is relatively easily to dismantle an intellectual construct like the third world, it is much more difficult to devise suitable alternatives. And alternative designations are sorely needed if we are to grasp a global geography where divisions are continually being produced and reproduced between wealthy people and places, and between poor people and places. There may be a continuum of wealth and poverty rather than a clear-cut bifurcation, but overall the differences are stark. A large-scale geographical terminology is surely needed if we are to think clearly about how the world is put together. While a sophisticated global geography would acknowledge a variety of conceptual schemes (deploying one lexicon, for example, to discuss economic flows, and another to analyze patterns of social development), in the end a simple shorthand way of distinguishing “two worlds” is still in order.

In looking for the right words to label the resulting divisions, surely it is best to avoid schemes that are either illogically constituted (as in dividing the globe into first and third worlds, with no second) or geographically absurd (putting Russia in a global South and Australia in a notional North). In general, it would be preferable to choose a set of terms that are highly descriptive and not loaded with theoretical preconceptions about the ultimate roots of global economic differentiation. With these considerations in mind, I prefer to call (most of) the so-called third world merely the “Poor Parts of the World” and (most of) the so-called first world merely the “Wealthy Parts of the World”—for that is exactly what they are. ■